

# Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory, edited by Francis T. Cullen and Pamela Wilcox

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*The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory* is organized not around schools of thought but around themes that shape much thinking about and research on crime. This more unconventional approach seeks to show that criminological theory is not static but dynamic. **Hamish Clift** feels that Handbook has a broad appeal and anyone – from lawyers to sociologists – with an interest in crime and criminal behaviour will enjoy navigating the road mapped by the editors.

**The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory. Francis T. Cullen and Pamela Wilcox (eds.). Oxford University Press. March 2013.**

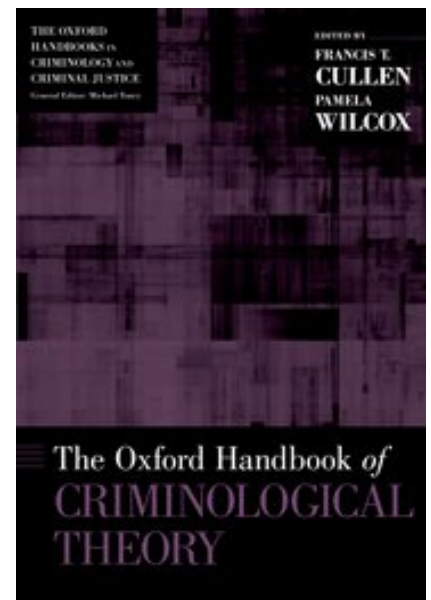
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The [Shakespeare Prison Project](#) is run in a prison just outside Brisbane, Australia. It's one of a number of similar projects around the world that uses performance as a therapeutic mechanism to foster rehabilitation. In so doing, the project forges participants' emotional and social awareness, sense of responsibility and confidence. This sort of engagement helps mitigate the negative effects of imprisonment and creates the opportunity for participant insight into offending behaviour.

The [United States](#) has the largest prison population in the world, thanks in large part to a public policy mantra of imprisonment. The tough on crime mentality has reached ubiquity around the world in modern crime and justice policy statements. This is manifest in policies such as mandatory minimum sentencing, shackled judicial discretion and the placement of imprisonment at the apex of crime control strategy. "No longer does the criminal justice system operate under the ideals that offenders are victims of dire circumstances and can be changed into law abiding citizens. Rather, offenders are seen as rational and calculating individuals who make logical decisions and must be refrained from crime through severe sanctions" (Jonson, p. 672). The Shakespeare Prison Project, and programs like it, exists to challenge the current policy mindset and spotlight that original idea: that criminals are merely those of us caught in circumstances that result in less ideal outcomes because of gaps in capacity or ability.

*The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory* is a door-stopping tome of 35 chapters, selected and arranged by [Francis T. Cullen](#) and [Pamela Wilcox](#). The book is organised into 11 parts in four sections, with each section containing two or more parts. Cullen and Willcox have grouped chapters thematically, or as they put it, created the road for the reader to travel across the criminological landscape. The emphasis on broad themes of research in criminology frees the book from doctrinal pigeonholing. By stepping away from categorising discourse according to doctrine, the editors are able to link directions in contemporary thought easily and connect the key themes that form the foundation of modern research.

The first section, Individual and Society, is the largest section of the book and comprises four parts: Biosocial Criminology; Individuals and Crime; Social Sources of Offending; and Crime and the Life Course. This section draws together work that explores the boundaries of the individual actor, empirically and theoretically. With the emphasis on the individual in this section, each chapter adroitly explores external factors such as biology, parenting, social



learning and support, life events and the life-course.

The second section moves away from the individual and considers contextual elements to offending and crime. There are three parts to Contexts of Offending: Peers, Gangs and Crime; Communities and Crime; and The American Experience and Crime. The section sensibly details small social contexts in the first part, before moving through community contexts to a national level. Structural and cultural considerations become relevant and the dynamism between social structures and cultural motivation and incentive becomes clear from the interplay of each of the chapters, as the reader journeys from micro to meso and macro contexts.

Section three, Choice and Opportunity, departs from considering the concrete actor and community and moves to the abstract in discussing behaviour and the criminal act. It has two parts: Deciding to Offend; and Opportunity Theories. Here, the contrast between propensity and opportunity is explored through different inquisitorial frameworks and what results is a series of insights into how the decision to act occurs.



Prison Rotterdam 3D. Credit: [wim hoppenbrouwers](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

In the Opportunity Theories part, the first chapter is a précis of the routine activity theory approach, proposed in [Cohen and Felson's seminal 1979 article](#). The approach is reviewed and its modern predictive capability analysed by Madero-Hernandez and Fisher. Routine activity theory attempts to explain how opportunities of crime are produced through day-to-day activities. The focus of the theory is on the situation of crime – the offending act, or crime incident – and not on the offender. In this way the theory is distinguished from many other criminological theories, which emphasise the role of the offender in their analysis. In so doing that theory posits that for a criminal act to occur, three elements are required: a motivated offender (which can be considered in terms of proximity and exposure); an attractive target; and a lack of guardianship.

Madero-Hernandez and Fisher go on to discuss the methodological difficulties with measuring the key concepts of

the theory, before discussing in empirical studies linked to each of methodologies that outlined. Their goal in the analysis is to understand the role of lifestyles routine in the offender-victim nexus and examine the strength of the theory against empirical tests. The chapter provides an excellent comparative analysis of the literature and empirical evidence associated with routine activity theory. But it is only as strong as the literature surveyed and the research available is not particularly fecund. The authors note the limitations of the literature in the opening paragraphs of the chapter and do their best to work around the gaps. Unfortunately the literature is a medley that does not adequately cover the full compass of the chapter. Nonetheless, Madero-Hernandez and Fisher's chapter is accessible and engaging and does an excellent job at surveying the available landscape. The chapter forms the basis for the others in the Opportunity Theories part, all of which venture into areas of research that have been neglected. Hopefully the inclusion of such chapters will be a catalyst to further research.

Theories of Power and Punishment is the fourth and smallest section and also has two parts: Critical Criminology; and Theories of the Criminal Sanction. It is in that last section that Jonson's chapter, quoted above, appears. This section is concerned with the mechanisms of punishment and coercion and how they are often unsatisfactory in achieving the stated and desired goals of punishment. At its core, this section questions the efficacy and use of imprisonment against the social and financial cost of imprisoning offenders.

Jonson's chapter considers imprisonment and recidivism through the lens of the "tough-on-crime" era of public policy. This chapter is interesting because a large majority of research on the subject considers either the abstract public policy or philosophical ramifications or the macro-level effects of mass imprisonment, whereas little research considers micro- or offender-level effects and even less the effect on reoffending behaviour. It considers the effect of imprisonment against the specific deterrence aim of imprisonment and contrasts this with evidence of imprisonment creating a criminogenic experience. After the theoretical components, a comparative review of empirical research. America's imprisonment binge, as Jonson calls it, has not resulted in a requisite science of imprisonment. Jonson finds this startling – especially given the rhetoric employed by politicians who insist that imprisonment is a strong disincentive to offend. The empirical meta-studies analysed indicate that imprisonment is, at best, not related to recidivism, but at worst, that prisons create a criminogenic experience which increases the likelihood of reoffending.

The theoretical-empirical comparative combination is well executed by Jonson in this chapter, but it is a little underwhelming. A broader consideration of the aims of imprisonment as a criminal sanction would be useful, and the public policy consequences and ideas for the future – such as rehabilitation strategies and re-entry programs – are all clear and cogent, but lack creativity. Demanding greater accountability from legislators is fine, especially given the lack of a science of imprisonment, but novel, compelling ideas for how to minimise the criminogenic effects of imprisonment and combat recidivism would make this chapter much better.

The journey charted by the editors is exciting and exceptionally worthwhile. But it is a journey; *The Oxford Handbook of Criminological Theory* is not a wide, sweeping synthesis of criminology. This is not a bad thing – there are plenty of books that approach such a synthesis. The structure of the book is engaging and useful, far more so than the organisation of chapters by doctrinal means. It is bursting with excellent research; each chapter is modern, interesting and relevant, but some chapters are not as robust as others. It is not overly academic or scholastic and should have appeal beyond the lecture theatre. The Handbook has a broad appeal and anyone – from lawyers to sociologists – with an interest in crime and criminal behaviour will enjoy navigating the road mapped by Cullen and Wilcox.

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